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ABSTRACT

This article relates the experiences of teachers from the Towson University/Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland, Professional Development School (PDS) site. A Collaborative Action Research Study Group (ARSG) was formed to facilitate the professional development of inservice teachers involved in PDS partnerships. Setup of the ARSG was modeled after an effort described in an article about an action research study group. A summer reading group was established following Sagor's (1992) five-step process (problem formulation, data collection, data analysis, reporting of results, and action planning). The group added the goal of developing paired-site camaraderie among teachers. The group met over the summer, every other week, at a different person's home, where dinner and conversation were as important as reflective interviewing and analytic discourse (both part of the lengthy problem formulation phase). By August, there were teachers from each school committed to conducting research. When school began, the group met monthly and moved on to the data collection and analysis phases. Research areas were varied, all came down to the question of the teacher's responsibility for certain aspects of the child's growth and development. The next step, data reporting, is underway. (SM)

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Action Research: Enhancing Collaboration, Nurturing Professionals

Kelly Gooden

2003

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Action Research: Enhancing Collaboration, Nurturing Professionals

Maryland Professional Development School Network's Second National Professional Development School Conference, *Staying the Course: PDS, and Anchor for P-16 Reform*

March 27-29, 2003

Towson University

Action research has been defined by many and in many different ways. It is essentially any long-term effort by teachers to collect and examine their own data so that they can make informed decisions about their own instruction. (Keith, 2001) Action research also falls under the broad umbrella of professional development in that the activity allows teachers to choose from a variety of options and design a program best suited to their needs. The teachers can take the results of their research and use the knowledge to affect future instructional decisions. By initiating, monitoring, adjusting, and evaluating action (Sagor, 1992) teachers develop their reflective skills and, thereby, develop as professional practitioners. Collaborative action research takes this idea further. Through collaborative action research, educators "can renew their commitment to thoughtful teaching and also begin developing an active community of professionals." (Sagor, 1992) This article relates the experiences of teachers from the Towson (TU)/ Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) PDS sites. The primary goal of the project was to allow teachers the opportunity to participate in this exciting form of professional development. The secondary goal was to build a singular paired-site PDS where previously there existed two completely separate schools.

The Start of Something Not So Big

The Collaborative Action Research Study Group (or ARSG as it came to be referred on forms, notes, emails, and work plans) began with a proposal inspired by two stimuli. First, the members of the Coordinating Committee for Project LINC were brainstorming methods for facilitating the professional development for the in-service teacher arm of the PDS partnerships. This led to a discussion of action research (which was already widely utilized and supported in the PGCPS district, but not among the schools affiliated with the LINC funded PDS partnerships). Around the same time, an article came out in Science and Children entitled *Action Research Brings Results*. The article outlined how a group of teachers in rural Montana and a faculty member at Montana State University got together (with the aid of an Eisenhower grant) to form an action research study group. The article inspired a thought...We had teachers; we had a university faculty member; we had grant money. It seemed that the formation of an ARSG was the perfect answer to our question – the question being, what is one way we can offer a professional development opportunity to teachers in our PDS?

We modeled the setup of our ARSG after the article in most ways. We requested (and received) money to pay a stipend of $500 to each participant. We set up a summer reading group and purchased copies of How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research (1992) by Richard Sagor for use at reading group meetings. We followed Sagor's five-step process (problem formulation, data collection, data analysis, reporting of results, and action planning). We did add another aspect that was not explicitly stated (but certainly implied) in the article. We had the secondary goal of developing paired-site camaraderie among our teachers. We wanted to get away from the idea of Kingsford is 'here' and Pullen is 'here' and Towson comes down from 'here' to work with each school separately and move toward the idea of we're all 'here' at the TU/Kingsford/Pullen PDS working for our kids. So there was a purposeful social aspect added to the mix. We met over the summer, every other week, at a different person's home where dinner and conversation were as important as reflective interviewing and analytic discourse (both parts of the lengthy problem formulation phase).

By the time school started in August, we not only had four teachers (two from each school) committed to and excited about conducting research but we also had five people (including the university faculty member) who knew each other pretty well. One of our members was a vegetarian which challenged others at future meetings to find something to prepare for dinner that she could eat. The movie *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding* was highly recommended by another member and by her husband who joined the group for discussion after preparing our dinner. Two of the members turned out to be qualified to teach as adjuncts in the intern preparation arm of our PDS, which was a great relief to the university faculty member charged with hiring adjuncts. Friendships across the two faculties (three, if you count Towson) had been formed.

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Another School Year Begins

When school started, we dropped back to monthly meetings held at alternating schools in deference to busy schedules and prepared to move on to Sagor's next phases – data collection and data analysis. Because of an unexpected grade assignment change, one teacher was unable to pursue the problem she had originally identified and had to return to the problem formulation phase with the added responsibilities of the start of the school year. Needless to say, this set her back a bit, but for the most part, everything was going according to schedule. The research areas were varied and are listed below.

The effects of teaching writing on reading acquisition
Parents' attitudes as a motivating factor for student (especially male) Participation in dance class
Teacher and student attitudes about and competence in the use of Instructional technology and the development of a second Grade technology curriculum
The effects of an equity-based, parent involvement science program on The attitudes and competence of kindergarten students in physical Science

Although the topics seem unrelated, discussions with the group about the concerns that led them to these research topics were more similar. All of them came down to a larger question – what is the responsibility of the teacher (school) for certain aspects of the child's growth and development? Everyone in the ARSG seemed to think this responsibility was great and that is was the primary indicator of positive growth and development in students. To that end, each research question was important to students' achievement and personal to the teacher.

And On it Goes...

At the time this article was written, the data collection and analysis phases were ending for some and beginning for others. Reporting results is Sagor's next step and while we're not all able to report on the results of our research, we are able to speak to the results of our secondary goal and to the research process.

- Participants benefited from their own research process and from the research of others. *"I am more aware of each student and their behaviors." "I learned from Bev about contacting parents sooner than I had been."*
- Participants enjoyed the collaborative aspect of this experience. *"It was helpful to be with other teachers." "Working with colleagues helped me to focus my research on the key issue. They provided objective feedback that I did not think about that helped me with my research." "They were always supportive."*
- Participants are willing to do research in the future and collaborative action research again (even if there were no stipend). *"I would participate because of the valuable information that you can gain from one another."*
- The text was both useful and user-friendly. *"Sagor's book was easy to read. It broke down the research process in a step by step manner, having one aspect attached to the one before."*
- Summer meetings were more enjoyable (and productive) than those held during the school year. *"The summer meetings were valuable because we were not stressed by school and other pressures. This allowed us to focus on the discussions. We weren't rushed to leave."*
- Teachers need an opportunity to celebrate themselves and showcase their accomplishments. Although they were somewhat "concerned," I think all of the teachers will benefit from sharing their results with their PDS colleagues and with district and state-level audiences such as this one.

Looking Ahead

A Summer Strategic Planning session for our PDS is coming up in June and so any work plan discussions for next year will have to wait, but the Towson faculty member would like to see the ARSG

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continued with this year's participants taking on the role of facilitators. We'd also like the size of the group to increase but still maintain an equal representation from both schools.

Dr. Kelly Gooden is an assistant professor of elementary education at Towson University and a former PGCPS teacher.
Members of the 2002-2003 ARSG:
Beverly Anderson, Dance Teacher, Pullen Arts Magnet
Maryann Fox, Literary Arts Teacher, Pullen Arts Magnet
Diane Spann, Second Grade Teacher, Kingsford Elementary
Rosilind Stevenson, Kindergarten Teacher, Kingsford Elementary

Resources

Keith, A. (2001). *Action Research Brings Results.* Science and Children, 39(3): 32-35.
Sagor, R. (1992). How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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